

Testimony of
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Education Committee
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***HB 5523 An Act Establishing a Task Force to Study
Paraprofessional Staffing Levels***

Good afternoon, Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann and members of the Education Committee. My name is Jackie Aviles, Co- President of the Hartford Federation of Paraprofessionals. I am honored to work and represent our members, who serve with great dedication to create an educational environment which is positive, safe and loving for our children. It is on their behalf that I testify today in favor of HB 5523, An Act Establishing a Task Force to Study Paraprofessional Staffing Levels.

When teachers and paraprofessionals have a strong, collaborative relationship in the classroom, no student is left behind because the teacher and paraprofessional work as one unit to educate the students. This collaboration is critical in Preschool and Kindergarten where the educational foundation is set. The basic stepping stone for success in school is set at this level. Any gap in learning at this stage sets the student up for failure. That is why it is so critical to have the paraprofessional in the classroom to reinforce learning when the teacher has students that require additional help. This is not the time for eliminating paraprofessionals in Pre-K and/or Kindergarten classrooms if we are to successfully address the widening achievement gap in Hartford and surrounding districts.

Paraprofessionals are key assets in the classroom and have added value not only in academics but also address emotional, physical and psychological needs of students. Paraprofessionals work with students who are learning disabled, have autism, visually and hearing impaired and also have emotional disabilities.

- For example, a teacher with a visually impaired student does not have the time or the training to work with this student. A certified visually impaired teacher works with a visually impaired student for 45 minutes and also trains the paraprofessional to take the material and change it from written to Braille. Then the paraprofessional has to teach the student how to use Braille to learn. The classroom teacher is unable to teach the student because she is not trained to work with the visually impaired so, this responsibility falls to the paraprofessional with the special training.

Budget cuts jeopardize student learning and the safety of both students and paraprofessionals. Positions are being cut and paraprofessionals are being assigned 2-4 students with varying levels of disabilities and needs causing increased injuries to paraprofessionals while performing their duties.

- For example, paraprofessionals are assigned students in wheel chairs and with a student who runs away. This creates enormous safety issues for the paraprofessional, teacher, other students as well as a disservice to the other student who is left alone while you chase the runner. This is also a liability for everyone involved.
- Paraprofessionals are assigned students at different grade levels and in different classrooms. Paraprofessionals are expected to support these students equally which is impossible. How can one person be in two classrooms to reinforce learning for students who are educationally at odds? The paraprofessional has to choose the student who needs the most assistance leaving the other without adequate support. Both students lose in this arrangement.
- Paraprofessionals are constantly being pulled from their students to cover classes as substitutes. When this occurs the student is either left alone and the teacher does not engage the student who has to sit unattended until the paraprofessional returns. No learning is taking place for the student during this time. In some schools, paraprofessionals are required to take their students with them to substitute because the classroom teacher refuses to work with the student while the paraprofessional is pulled out.

Paraprofessionals are required to support student with Individualized Educational Plans (IEP's) but have difficulty gaining access to the plans. IEP's and Behavior Improvement Plans (BIP's) are not shared with paraprofessionals; this affects our ability to provide the best service to our students. How are we to address students' needs and support the teacher when we don't have access to these documents?

Budget monies can be better utilized to help those students who are currently placed 3-4 students to 1 adult in a classroom. By appropriately and adequately staffing paraprofessional positions, we will be able to provide the attention required to assist students in meeting their educational goals and objectives. This will also reduce the likelihood of injuries to paraprofessionals in the performance of their duties. Budget monies spent on consultants and other non student related positions could be used for training and upgrading the skill-set of Paraprofessionals.

In conclusion, I urge you to pass HB 5523, Establishing a Task Force to Study Paraprofessional Staffing Levels because paraprofessionals are a valuable asset to both the teacher as a partner in the classroom and to students by reinforcing the academic growth and success of our students. We need to be sure that districts staff and utilize them appropriately. Thank you and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.